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The Earth is the Lord's¹

Harold Remus

*Professor, Department of Religion and Culture,
Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo*

Text: Psalm 24

A long, long time ago, in my last year in high school, I was appointed Chairman of the Baccalaureate Committee, which had the responsibility for planning the religious service for our fellow graduates. The fact that I was called Chairman, and not Chairperson, or simply Chair gives you some idea that it didn't take place yesterday. It was so far back and so long ago that driving with only one hand on the steering wheel when out on a date was looked on as a safety hazard—today that is encouraged just as long as the one free hand holds a telephone; such are the blessings of technology.

Why I was appointed Chairman of that Baccalaureate Committee is one of those mysteries that must be left to inscrutable divine counsels—because I was not exactly the most pious boy in the class nor was I voted best behaved by my classmates.

What happened at the Baccalaureate I couldn't begin to remember. But I do remember the sorts of things that occupied my thoughts and the thoughts of my classmates and of many men returning from service overseas and their wives or wives-to-be at home. It was after World War II had ended. The dark cloud of war had lifted, opening up vistas—vistas that had been closed because of the war. Once again people could buy tires for their cars. Once again, unrationed gasoline was available, unrationed sugar, unrationed meat. There was a stupendous thing in the works called television which would open vistas in ways we had never even dreamed.

And people had done a lot of dreaming during those dark days of the war. In faraway England (as Vera Lynn sang to

us), there would once again be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover. And the lights would go on again all over the world, as another popular song affirmed. Newlyweds, as still another popular song told us, would honeymoon in Cairo, transported there in a brand new autogiro, then home by rocket from the moon, then settle down near Dallas in a little plastic palace—you could buy that dream, concluded the song.

And people did: they went out and literally bought that dream, and many others as well:

washers, driers, dishwashers,
TVs, hi-fis, houses,
cars with fins, cars with tails,
then clothes and jewelry,
then a vaccine for polio,
mood-altering pills,
mind-blowing drugs,
a place on the moon and satellites
and space stations encircling the earth.

Whatever it was you could get it. And if it didn't exist, well, you could invent it, discover it, synthesize it. The world was ours, and the fulness thereof—it was ours for the taking.

And where did religion fit in? In those days, when people in North America said "religion" most of them automatically thought Christianity. And when they thought of Christianity they thought of salvation. God was Saviour. God had saved the men fighting on the beaches and dug into foxholes and flying in bombers through the ack-ack. God had saved this continent from the ravages of war. In the terminology of the Christian creeds, God was the God of the Second Article, the Saviour.

And now, in 1988, what do we see at Baccalaureate? What do you see?

The reason this service is called Baccalaureate, or why the graduate of a university is called a baccalaureate, a bachelor, is unclear, according to the philologists. But, gathered here today, I think we would all agree that baccalaureate certainly has to do with achievement, with the reaching of a goal, an end—the end of your university studies.

If you are like me, you might be thinking of "end" these days in a much broader and more sombre sense, however. Just

think of what the world looks like today compared with how it appeared to so many North Americans at the end of World War II:

Then, natural resources were abundant—unbounded, it seems. Today, we see those resources being rapidly depleted: Denuding of forests in one country causes disastrous floods in a neighbouring country. Deforestation in South America reduces the world's oxygen supply. Fossil fuels are finite in quantity, and when we burn them we contribute to a warming effect that may cause the oceans to overflow the streets of some of our coastal cities. The oceans themselves—wondrous homes of wondrous creatures, and in the past able to cleanse and regenerate themselves—these oceans are now being choked with plastic bags, with black blobs, with drug syringes—the waste and detritus of our “way of life”.

Closer to home, no longer can we simply dump our refuse, our so-called waste, on the once-so-plentiful and accommodating countryside—we are threatened with suffocation in our own garbage. Our freeways often resemble giant parking lots, with the occupants of the cars and trucks and buses caught in the grip of these gridlocks forced into a neighbourliness that is anything but neighbourly.

Wherever we look, earth, air, water are threatened. Those open vistas after World War II are closing, and closing rapidly.

In religious terms, we might say that, once again, what we should focus on is salvation—but salvation now, not of our souls, but of our earth and its fulness. That kind of salvation is another aspect of deity that religions emphasize. In the Christian creed, it is the First Article, God as creator. And that credo derives, of course, from Judaism, from the opening chapters of Genesis (from which we read this morning), also from the Psalms, from Isaiah and the other prophets. God created the heavens and the earth and all sorts of plants, all sorts of flying creatures, all sorts of creeping and crawling and ambling creatures, and humans, and placed them in that wondrous garden, the earth. The ancient Babylonians had a creation epic, telling how the god Marduk fought the goddess Tiamat and slew her and from her body fashioned the vault of the sky and the abode of the earth and placed humans on the earth. Other religions and other peoples have similar stories.

In all these stories, what we see is a given, a something-there-before-us, prior to us. It is traditionally called "creation", but we humans didn't create it. We have learned how to do lots of face-lifting of the earth's surface, but we are too often like the sorcerer's apprentice that a second-century Greek story tells us about and that Walt Disney popularized in *Fantasia*: we know enough to set technology to work for us but are we its master, or has it mastered us?

Those of you who are graduating—what do you look for on this graduation day? I don't know that wants and goals have changed so much since those days after World War II: people still want jobs, a house and a home, with love, family, and possessions. You have paid a big price to get this far, and so have your parents and others who have stood by you over your years in university. So have the federal and provincial governments that fund this university and most other universities across the land.

But if we want to think of prices we pay, we have also to think that some things are beyond price, they cannot be bought. One such priceless treasure is the earth.

What you do and the way you choose to do your jobs and live your lives—these will tell whether you are a preserver or a despoiler of this treasure. Here is where I would direct your attention to the psalm for this morning, Psalm 24. I believe it offers some guidance for a time such as ours. It is one of the psalms that the scholars call "psalms of entrance". Why "entrance"? Because the psalmist sings of entering the gates of Jerusalem. Going up to Jerusalem, to the Temple of the Lord there, the psalmist reflects on the earth round about him and on the earth so firm beneath his feet. Was it not a wonder that the earth did not sway and rock as he walked? For, after all, according to the science of the day, the earth rested on a great invisible sea of water. In awe at this wonder, the psalmist exclaims, "The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it." Awe and wonder can lead to wisdom, and I believe the psalmist is pointing us to forgotten wisdom when he says that "The earth is the Lord's." The earth doesn't belong to us. It is entrusted to us, from one generation to another.

And a generation is not very long. The great Greek epic, the *Iliad*, likens the generations to autumn leaves which the wind scatters on the earth, only to be replaced the next spring when

the trees bud afresh and new leaves appear (*Il.6.145ff*). During the Babylonian exile of the Jews, an anonymous prophet whose words are recorded in the book of Isaiah observes that humans are like the grass of the field and their beauty like the flower of the field—and “the grass withers, the flower fades” (Isaiah 40:6–8). An old student song, whose music Brahms orchestrated for his *Academic Festival Overture*, sings, Let us now rejoice while we are young, for after joyous youth comes troublesome old age, and then (in the words of the Latin), *nos habebit humus*—“the earth will have us.” Indeed, the earth will claim us all. But if we want that to be in the usual way—dying of what we call natural causes and passing the earth on to the next generation—then we have to treat the earth with respect. For I think we would still all want to say, with the narrator of the first chapter of Genesis, that the earth is good. How good it is, and in what *ways* it is good, has been much disputed since Charles Darwin’s day. But given that the earth is our natural habitat, our home, the place suitable for our flora and our fauna, for human habitation, it is good. And we need to treasure and preserve it.

I want to conclude with two stories from the Bible. The first is from the book of Jeremiah. For some years the prophet Jeremiah has gone about Jerusalem predicting that the kingdom of Judah will be conquered by the superpower of the day, Babylonia. But then one day the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah telling him to buy some property from his cousin. A foolish thing to do—buy property when the country is going to be overrun by foreign invaders, and people are going to be routed out of house and home and property values are going to plummet. But Jeremiah buys the property, and in the presence of witnesses to the sale he says that his message from the Lord is that someday houses and fields and vineyards will again be bought in the land (32:9–15). Once again the land will be fit for habitation. Isn’t that a vision—and a goal—to hold before ourselves: that the earth will once again, and also in the future, be fit for habitation, with houses and fields and vineyards and flora and fauna?

Having said that, one has to add that that is not going to happen just by itself, automatically. And that is where my second story comes in. This time the setting is Persia, the superpower that conquered Babylonia. Jews are living there,

in exile from their homeland, even as many people in Canada are today. There is an insidious plot against the Jews, to wipe out these unwelcome outsiders. But the Queen happens to be a Jewish woman named Esther. Her cousin Mordecai comes to her and tells her of the plot and pleads with her to risk her life by interceding with the king on behalf of the Jews. Don't think, he says, that just because you live in the king's palace that you will escape the fate of the rest of the Jews. And "who knows," he asks her, "whether you have not come to the kingdom for [just] such a time as this?" (4:14). And who knows whether we here today have come to earth for just such a time as this?

Notes

- ¹ Preached at the Baccalaureate Service, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, November 1988.